

VZCZCXRO8161  
OO RUEHCHI RUEHDT RUEHHM  
DE RUEHML #4343/01 2860833  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
O 130833Z OCT 06  
FM AMEMBASSY MANILA  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 3479  
INFO RUEHZS/ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS IMMEDIATE  
RHHMUNA/CDRUSPACOM HONOLULU HI IMMEDIATE  
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC IMMEDIATE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 004343

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/13/2016  
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PINS](#) [EAID](#) [RP](#)  
SUBJECT: GOVERNMENT/MILF PEACE TALKS

Classified By: DCM Paul W. Jones, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary. DCM and Pol/C encouraged the head of the Philippine Government negotiating panel with the MILF insurgents to try to rejuvenate the peace talks, currently stalled on the issue of land rights. The thoughtful and experienced negotiator, Silvestre Afable, said he was finalizing plans to transfer over 600 Muslim villages to the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao as a sign of good faith, but hundreds of other villages that lack Muslim majorities remain in dispute. Afable described his efforts to convince the MILF to use its nascent development agency to undertake projects in disputed villages to convince them to vote in favor of joining the ARMM. Even Christian villagers in Mindanao felt so alienated from the national government that they would respond favorably to development projects sponsored by the MILF's development agency, Afable maintained, but it was hard to convince the MILF to open up and act like a political entity. Afable suggested that the U.S. could contribute to controlling a dangerous local feud that threatened the peace process, while also gaining influence over the MILF, by helping rebuild houses destroyed in the fighting earlier this year in Maguindanao. We are considering this proposal. While the actual negotiations are stalled for now, political support for the peace process remains strong, despite recent bombings attributed by some to MILF-connected terrorists. End Summary.

¶2. (C) In a meeting with DCM and Pol/C on October 12, head of the GRP negotiating panel with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) Silvestre C. Afable described the counter-offer he planned to present to the MILF by the end of the month in order to revive the peace talks, currently stalled over another dispute about land rights/ancestral domain. He said he had been working closely with key members of Congress, notably with Speaker of the House Jose De Venecia and Senator Ed Angara, and now believes there is sufficient support for legislation that would bring 613 new "barangays" (the lowest governmental unit in the Philippines) into the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao. While he admitted this was substantially less than the more than 3,000 barangays the MILF had claimed, the GRP would present it as a first step. Most of the 613 barangays were on the outskirts of the ARMM but are located in provinces that are not predominantly Muslim and so were not included in an earlier expansion of the ARMM's territory. Afable said that his earlier proposal to conduct a joint census of disputed areas now appeared dead, and speculated that the MILF opposed it because they knew the outcome would not be favorable. DCM described how expert international census assistance had played a useful role in a similar situation in the Balkans, but Afable said he had concluded that the MILF was not interested in any census of local populations.

¶3. (C) Afable also described a new proposal to transform the Bangsamoro Development Authority (BDA) into a fully legal entity, perhaps even an official GRP entity if the MILF

desired. This, he said, would give the MILF easier and more substantial access to funds that it could then use to promote the welfare of local residents, and gain additional credibility locally and internationally. Even Christian villagers in Mindanao felt so alienated from the national government that they would respond favorably to development projects sponsored by the MILF's development agency, Afable maintained. He admitted that the GRP would have to scrutinize the BDA's programs very closely to ensure that funds were not going for weapons. He admitted that his earlier goal of revitalizing the Southern Philippines Development Authority, with a board comprising both MILF and Moro National Liberation Front members, had been dashed when President Arroyo in September appointed as its new administrator a member of the powerful Ampatuan clan from Maguindanao, seen as hostile to the MILF. He expressed some confusion about how the SPDA and BDA would co-exist.

14. (C) Afable attributed the tougher negotiating stance of the MILF to internal rivalries, with hard-line local commanders in the province of Lanao del Sur causing problems for MILF Chairman Murad. An October 10 meeting of the influential Bishops/Ulamas Conference in Davao, which included representatives from the MILF, had vowed to play a more active role in reducing tensions and encouraging peace. However, the Ampatuan/MILF "rido" (revenge feud) was also continuing in Maguindanao, with Governor Andal Ampatuan even blocking the reconstruction of more than 200 homes that were burned during the violence over the summer. Afable suggested the USG consider undertaking the reconstruction of these homes, either directly or through an international NGO. DCM promised to discuss this possibility with USAID, some of whose energy projects were also damaged or destroyed during the fighting.

MANILA 00004343 002 OF 002

15. (C) At least three for-hire bombers, including one Malaysian, under the protection of certain MILF commanders appear to have been responsible for the four bombings on October 10 and 11 in Cotabato and Sultan Kudarat, according to Afable. He said he was trying to convince the MILF to turn these suspects over to authorities, along with some other individuals (also under the protection of MILF commanders) who have been formally charged with responsibility for bombings over the past several years that have killed members or supporters of the Ampatuan clan. He said he was not optimistic of success, however. DCM noted how surprising it was that there had been no calls by politicians for breaking off peace talks in light of this alleged MILF involvement in bombings, but Afable noted that there was wide political support, even among the opposition, for the peace process.

16. (C) Afable welcomed the prospect of direct talks between Embassy representatives and MILF Chairman Murad, both to demonstrate continued US support for the peace process and as a way of encouraging MILF cooperation in the peace talks and in the work of the Ad Hoc Joint Action Group (AHJAG) against criminals and terrorists. He said that, despite the frustration over land rights and peace talks, the International Monitoring Team, AHJAG, and Coordinating Committees on the Cessation of Hostilities continued to play valuable roles. He also praised USG efforts on Jolo, admitting his surprise that U.S. military humanitarian and development efforts were so warmly received by villagers.

17. (C) Comment: While the peace talks remain stalled, the good news is that the peace process on the ground continues, with growing expressions of support from local communities for peace and development. Pressure from residents on both the GRP and the MILF may help push the two sides into acceptable compromises, although the negotiating process will likely still take considerable time, as will the implementation period. USG assistance is playing a very helpful role in changing the local environment and mentality

away from lawlessness and toward prosperity throughout Muslim Mindanao.

Visit Embassy Manila's Classified website:  
<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/eap/manila/index.cfm>  
KENNEY